

*Ilkka Pyysiäinen*

**SOUNDS OF SILENCE.  
“MYSTICAL” PARADOX IN THE  
ATTHAKAVAGGA**

*This is a copy of the article from printed version of electronic journal*

***Folklore Vol. 15***

ISSN 1406-0957

*Editors Mare Kõiva & Andres Kuperjanov*

*Published by the Folk Belief and Media Group of ELM*

---

**Folklore**

**Electronic Journal of Folklore**

Electronic version ISSN 1406-0949 is available from

***<http://haldjas.folklore.ee/folklore>***

It's free but do give us credit when you cite!

© *Folk Belief and Media Group of ELM, Andres Kuperjanov*

---

**Tartu 2000**

# SOUNDS OF SILENCE. “MYSTICAL” PARADOX IN THE ATTHAKAVAGGA

*Ilkka Pyysiäinen*

You tell me that silence  
is nearer to peace than poems  
but if for my gift  
I brought you silence  
(for I know silence)  
you would say  
*This is not silence*  
*this is another poem*  
and you would hand it back to me.  
(Cohen 1972: 3)

## PARADOX IN THE ATTHAKAVAGGA

In this article I will attempt to demonstrate how conceptual paradox has been used in Buddhism as a means of liberation, illustrating my case using the Theravāda Buddhist text, Atthakavagga, which is part of the Suttanipāta (see Gómez 1976). The Atthakavagga contains some of the oldest materials in the Tipitaka (see Gómez 1976: 139, 152; Vetter 1990: 42–43; Burford 1992: 39). Its particular message is that one should not hold any “views” (*ditthi*) or prefer any one thing to another (see Gómez 1976: 140).<sup>1</sup> Although the Atthakavagga emphasizes that “seeing” leads to or even constitutes the goal, it warns against formulating that vision into a view because attachment to views is based on desire. To avoid suffering, one should not become attached even to the right view (Burford 1992: 45–47). On the contrary, one should “abstain from disputes, for their only aim is praise and profit (Sn 4: 828; also 4: 844)”. And,

*If any have taken up a view (ditthi) and argue, saying, “Only this is true,” then say to them, “There will be no opponent for you here when a dispute has arisen.” (Sn 4: 832. This and the following translation by K. R. Norman.)*

In parallel to this:

*“Māgandiya,” said the Blessed One, “nothing has been grasped by (me) from among the (doctrines), after consideration, (saying) ‘I profess this.’ But looking among the (doctrines), not grasping, while searching I saw inner peace.” (Sn 4: 837.)*

Grace Burford has drawn attention to the fact that the teaching of the Atthakavagga contains a paradox in that it endorses a view that views are to be avoided. A similar paradox is at the very heart of Buddhism in the sense that one cannot eliminate desire (*tanhā/trshnā*) without thus desiring (Burford 1992: 48; see Pyysiäinen 1996b).

From a logical point of view, the Buddhist dilemma is the same as in the famous liar paradox of Epimenides: Epimenides says that all Cretans are liars, but as he is a Cretan himself he is lying and so ... From the point of view of Russell and Whitehead’s theory of logical types, these paradoxes result from the fact that a class cannot be its own member. Buddhists form the class of Buddhists, but a single Buddhist does not constitute that class, for example. The concept of class is of a higher logical type than the concept of member. Now, because Epimenides is a Cretan his statement “all Cretans are liars” is apparently a member of the class of “Cretan statements.” At the same time it purports to be a description of this class. But a description of a class cannot be a member of that class, and thus we have a paradox (see Quine 1966; Watzlawick & Beavis & Jackson 1967: 187–194).

Similarly, the statement “do not get attached to views” can be understood to be both a member of the class of “views” and a statement about that class, which makes it logically incoherent. The Atthakavagga approaches views in a purely negative manner, only explaining what one should *not* do, and the ideal is expressed mostly by such terms as ‘purity’ (*suddhi*) and ‘calmness’ (*santi*) which both receive their meaning from what is not the case (Burford 1992: 40, 42). This, however, can also be considered a view, which then leads to a paradox, although this may not always have been consciously recognized by the believers.

## PARADOX AND CHANGE

My suggestion now is that the paradox of having a view that views should be abandoned can, in principle, be an effective instrument of psychological change, and not just an unfortunate logical error. To understand this, we can pay attention to how paradoxes have been used in such psychotherapies based on cybernetics and systems theory.<sup>2</sup> In them, paradoxes and paradoxical tasks are the “mirror images” of pathological situations known as “double binds,” themselves a form of paradox (see Watzlawick 1990: 41). Double binds occur in important human relationships when, for various “pathological” reasons, the one who has authority over the other communicates something and at the same time metacommunicates that the message should not be understood as it appears. The other person is now in a double bind in the sense that whatever he or she does as a reaction to the message, it is always wrong (see Bateson *et al.* 1956).

The prime example of a double bind is the situation between a mother who cannot accept her hostile feelings toward her child. To deny the situation, she pretends to be extremely loving to the child. This pretending is metacommunication concerning the mother’s hostility which it is meant to deny. Now, if the child accepts the real message that the mother has hostile feelings, he or she will be scolded by the mother for “being bad,” because the mother cannot accept the truth. If, on the other hand, the child accepts the pretended loving as if it were real and responds to it affectionately, the mother becomes anxious and reproaches the child for “behaving stupidly.”

A child in a double bind is in danger of developing schizophrenia as the only possible solution in a paradoxical situation, because he or she cannot escape from the situation or comment on it as though from outside. Bateson’s group compared this to the situation of a Zen novice whom the master threatens with a stick, saying: “If you say this stick is real, I will strike you with it. If you say this stick is not real, I will strike you with it. If you don’t say anything, I will strike you with it.” The difference between this situation and that leading to schizophrenia is that the novice is not absolutely dependent on the master and can thus endanger the relationship by for instance taking the stick away from the master, who might even accept this as an answer (Bateson *et al.* 1956: 254).

In a typical double bind, the participants are playing a game without end, because there are no rules for changing the rules of the game, and a *circulos vitiosus* results (see Watzlawick 1990: 28–42, 184). In such cases, attempts to solve a problem become part of the problem. Consequently, what is needed is a change in the ways people try to change the situation – a metachange. This can often be done using paradoxes, like in the exemplary case of a newly married couple treated like children by the husband’s parents. The harder the young couple tried to convince the parents that they were perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, the more stubbornly the parents treated them as helpless children. Family therapists then gave the couple the paradoxical task of acting as childish as possible toward the parents (a metachange), with the result that the parents were soon fed up and reproached the couple for acting like little children instead of being responsible adults. Things then soon got better (see Watzlawick and Weakland & Fisch 1974).

## CONCLUSION

I shall not provide any detailed analysis of the Atthakavagga, but shall only briefly comment on Gómez’ conclusions regarding it. In his opinion, what for the Buddhists are the “fundamental illusions of *samsāric* bondage” belong to the realm of language and conceptualization, and consequently the Atthakavagga’s central message is nondualism, the cessation of that multiplicity and dispersion (*papañca*) that arises with wrongly applied apperception (*saññā*) (Gómez 1976: 141–143, 154; see Vetter 1990: 45). From this perspective, views are not only a representation of desire, but desire is a representation (or a concomitant) of views and differentiation (cf. Burford 1992: 43–44), which is the ultimate cause of suffering.

If Gómez is right that the Atthakavagga here represents a similar type of path theory as the Mdhyamika and Zen (Gómez 1976: 153), then the Atthakavagga’s anti-views paradox could be interpreted as an instrument of liberation, a “skilful means” (*upāya*), and not as an unfortunate failure to achieve logical coherence. If the ideal is to dispense with attachments, including attachment to this ideal, only a paradox can convey the message properly. The Atthakavagga is not as explicit as Zen in its use of paradox and emphasis on silence,

but implicitly the roots of such an approach are present in it. The mystical silence may then have been temporarily overshadowed by the technical “language of liberation” developed in the Abhidharma (see Gómez 1987: 447).

Zen texts, however, are clear about the fact that the way to liberation cannot be based on *solving* the problem of suffering intellectually, but on making it disappear (cf. Watzlawick and Bavelas & Jackson 1967: 271). Hence, for example, the following exhortation in the commentary on Mumonkan’s first *kōan*: “You meet a Buddha? You kill him!” Only a paradox can fully express what is at stake in the idea of liberation, and Zen legends make full use of it (cf. Sharf 1995).

In this perspective, the Buddhist paradoxes of wanting not to want, or having a view that views should be avoided, can be understood both as expressions of the belief that the Buddhist ideal escapes verbal language and discursive thinking, and as an instrument of taking one beyond the usual, discursive way of trying to solve a problem (which only increases suffering in a vicious circle). All discursive attempts to solve the problem of suffering soon become part of the problem, leading to a game without end. The Atthakavagga’s paradox is a mirror image of the double bind caused by such messages as “you should want not to want,” and can help one to realize that one should change the very strategy of bringing about change. This does not mean a new way of solving problems, but instead making problems vanish.

The condition of the one who has thus freed himself of views is described in the Atthakavagga as follows:

*There are no ties for one who is devoid of mental representations (saññā).<sup>3</sup> There are no illusions for one who is released through wisdom (paññāvimutti). But those who have grasped mental representations and views wander in the world (loka), causing offence. (Sn 4: 847. Tr. by K. R. Norman, with “mental representations” substituted for “perceptions” as a translation for saññā.)*

*He has no (ordinary) mental representations of mental representations, he has no deranged mental representations of mental representations, he is not without mental representations, he has no mental representations of what has disappeared. For one who*

*has attained such a state, form disappears, for that which is named 'diversification' (papañcasankhā) has its origin in mental representations. (Sn 4:874. Tr. by K. R. Norman, with 'mental representations' substituted for 'perceptions.')*

According to Gómez, these passages testify to an emphasis on *mystical silence*<sup>4</sup> in early Buddhism, in the sense that it is said that the ultimate truth may be realized only in a nondiscursive, unspeakable experience which brings peace of mind. That experience should not be conceptualized into a “view” to be defended in disputes whose only aim is “praise and profit” and which only increase suffering (as the history of religions only too sadly testifies). Whether there really have been such experiences or not, this *idea* is nevertheless present in such texts as the Atthakavagga. Conceptual paradox has been used to express what, on the conceptual level, is at stake in Buddhist doctrine. How the early Buddhists actually reacted to such paradoxes can never be determined. I have only speculatively used certain family therapies to illustrate what kinds of paradoxical situations are generally involved in human communication.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Tilmann Vetter (1990: 44), the Atthakavagga is not a homogenous whole, as six of the sixteen Suttas do not propound mysticism in the sense presented by Gómez.

<sup>2</sup> Such therapies have their roots in the famous article “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia” by Gregory Bateson’s research group (Bateson *et al.* 1956.). Among therapies drawing from Bateson’s ideas have been Jay Haley’s strategic therapy, Salvador Minuchin’s structural therapy and the systemic family therapy of Mara Selvini Palazzoli and her group. See e.g. Haley 1977; Madaness & Haley 1977: 88–98; Minuchin 1974; Selvini Palazzoli *et al.* 1990.

<sup>3</sup> I have used this translation in Pyysiäinen 1993. Later, I realized that Gómez (1976: 144) has criticized the way of translating *saññā / samjñā* as ‘consciousness’ or ‘perception,’ and translated it as ‘apperception.’

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere (Pyysiäinen 1996a) I have attempted to develop a theory of mysticism that takes into account both mystical doctrine and mystical experience, operating in a hermeneutical circle.

## References

- Bateson, Gregory, *et al.* 1956. Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia. *Behavioral Science*, 1, pp. 251–264.
- Burford, Grace G. 1992. Theravāda Buddhist Soteriology and the Paradox of Desire. *Paths to Liberation*. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. & Robert M. Gimello (eds.). Kuroda Institute: *Studies in East Asian Buddhism*, 7. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 37–61.
- Cohen, Leonard 1972 (1961). *The Spice-Box of Earth*. Toronto & Montreal: McClelland and Stewart.
- Gómez, Luis O. 1976. Proto-Mādhyamika in the Pāli Canon. *Philosophy East and West*, 26, pp. 137–165.
- Gómez, Luis O. 1987. Buddhist Views of Language. *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. M. Eliade, *et al.* (ed.). Vol. 8. London & New York: Macmillan, pp. 446–451.
- Haley, Jay 1977. *Problem-Solving Therapy*. San Francisco & Washington & London: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Madaness, Cloe & Haley, Jay 1977. Dimensions of Family Therapy. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 165, pp. 88–98.
- Minuchin, Salvador 1974. *Families and Family Therapy*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Mumonkan. R. H. Blyth 1966. *Zen and Zen Classics*, Vol. 4. Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press.
- Pyysiäinen, Ilkka 1993. *Beyond Language and Reason. Mysticism in Indian Buddhism*. (*Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae. Dissertationes Humanarum Litterarum*, 66.) Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Sciences.
- Pyysiäinen, Ilkka 1996a. *Belief and Beyond. Religious Categorization of Reality*. Religionsvetenskapliga skrifter 33. Åbo: Åbo Akademi.
- Pyysiäinen, Ilkka 1996b. Jñānagarbha and the God's-Eye view. *Asian Philosophy*, 6, pp. 197–206.
- Quine, Willard van O. 1966. The Ways of Paradox. *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*. New York: Random House.
- Selvini Palazzoli, Mara, *et al.* 1990 (1975). *Paradox and Counterparadox*. Tr. by E. V. Burt. Northvale, New Jersey & London: Jason Aronson.
- Sharf, Robert H. 1995. Buddhist modernism and the rhetoric of meditative experience. *Numen*, 42, pp. 228–283.
- Suttanipāta*. The Pāli Text Society edition and translation.
- Watzlawick, Paul 1990. *Münchhausen's Pigtail, or Psychotherapy & Reality*. New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Watzlawick, Paul & Janet Bavelas Beavis & Don D. Jackson 1967. *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. New York & London: W. W. Norton.
- Watzlawick, Paul & John Weakland & Richard Fisch 1974. *Change*. New York: Norton.
- Vetter, Tilmann 1990. Some Remarks on Older Parts of the Suttanipāta. *Earliest Buddhism and Mādhyamika*. Panels of the VII World Sanskrit Conference. D. S. Ruegg & L. Schmithausen (eds.). Leiden: E. J. Brill, pp. 36–56.